

NATHANAEL WEST'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE FACTORY: A Reappraisal of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*

[Master's Thesis by Frank Landsman, MA

[Awarded Gold Star at *Engels Seminarium* / America Institute]

Faculty of Letters, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.]

Tutor: Dr Paul Gabriner

November 1988; slightly revised version, December 2007

N.B. Please acknowledge the author's name when quoting any part of or deriving any ideas from this thesis,

and kindly notify the author by Email: <frankiesmash123@gmail.com>

CHAPTER III

HIGHBROWBEATING ABOUT THE BUSH

Les rêves ne sont pas réalisables, nous le savons
Nous n'en formerions peut-être pas sans le désir,
et il est utile d'en former pour les voir échouer et
que leur échec instruisse. 49

Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27)

Balso Snell, a philistine "poet" whose cultural baggage consists of the American pop art examined earlier, is the type of tourist that returns from a holiday in Greece commenting that notwithstanding the fine weather, the temples were all in a deplorable state.

When the tour guide shows Balso an ancient Greek column (transformed into a Doric prostrate gland to fit the physical imagery of his surroundings), Balso dismisses this tourist site as

Simply an atrophied pile. 50 You call this dump grand and glorious, do you? Have you ever seen the Grand Central Station, or the Yale Bowl, or the Holland Tunnel, or the New Madison Square Garden? Exposed plumbing, stinker, that's all I see - and at this late date. It's criminally backward, do you hear me? (p. 6)

In turn, the guide scornfully labels Balso as "an ambassador from that ingenious people, the inventors and perfectors of the automatic water-closet" as opposed to his proud ascendance of "The Grandeur that was Greece and the Glory that was Rome" (p. 6), although later on he turns out to be a Jew. 51

Balso's contempt for classical culture is physically expressed by his anal rape of the Trojan horse, *totum pro parte*, for he enters the "posterior opening of the alimentary canal" (p. 4) with his entire body.

After the friendly guide has received a shower of abuse from this American "backdoor gatecrasher", he tells Balso: "Mind your manners,

foreigner. If you don't like it here, why don't you go back where you came from?" (p. 6).

25

Balso's philistinism – his later seduction speeches (pp. 58-60) seem to be derived from a *Bluff Your Way thru European Culture* guide rather than based on profound erudition – and Janey Davenport's self-indulgent banality, prudish primness and romantic clichés may be mercilessly exposed as American vices. But one ought to beware of jumping to the conclusion that West was a European art aficionado, a mere snob who looked down on America's cultural heritage. 52

The banalised portrayal of the American abroad as represented by Balso and Janey may be justified, but so is West's relentless ridicule of the arty pretensions and dandified artificiality of the highbrow artists and literati from Europe. The bewildering catalogue of "spoofed" authors includes, in historical order, Classical writers Euripides and Homer,

Geoffrey Chaucer*, Marquis de Sade*, John Keats*, Edgar Allan Poe*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lewis Carroll*, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Alfred Jarry*, Sigmund Freud*, Marcel Proust*, Bertolt Brecht*, and James Joyce*.

Thus, *Balso Snell* as a text is really a collage of parody, pastiche and literary allusion to, respectively, *The Bacchae*, *The Odyssey*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*, *Lamia*, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*, *A Rebours*, *Ubu Roi*, *Die Traumdeutung*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Baal*, and *Ulysses*.

The more elaborate prose style required for this literary ventriloquism clashes wittily with the fragmented "comic strip" style examined earlier. Some of the "spoofed" authors are explicitly mentioned (Sade, Huysmans, Homer, Juvenal), while others are easily identifiable through well-known names of characters (Raskolnikov and Iago) or burlesque of plot: the murder of an idiot (sic) in John Raskolnikov Gilson's *Crime Journal* (pp. 13-22) and his references to "honest Iago" (p. 14) are obvious winks at *Crime and Punishment* 53 and *Othello*. 54

Other authors can only be traced by spotting odd, foreign names and by carefully acknowledging a sudden shift of tone and vocabulary. Subtle, rather elusive allusions to the work of the asterisked (*) writers mentioned above are made in this way. None of these "hidden" tricks of West's trade of parody have been located so far, to my knowledge.

Yet it is important to play this literary game of blindman's buff in order to reveal West's status as a pioneer parodist in 20th century American fiction. His mastery of what might be called a "*whodunit* for literary cognoscenti" surely paved the way for later practitioners of the genre such as Nabokov, Hawkes, Barth, Pynchon, and Martin Amis. 55

Furthermore, West aimed beyond brilliant *spielerei* by a sophisticated amalgamation of form and thematic content, as will be shown.

The motto preceding *Balso Snell*, "After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey", signed by "BERGOTTE" (p. 2) has been mistaken for a fragment written by Bergotte. 55 In actual fact, Bergotte is no real person, but a character appearing in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Bergotte's dying words are recorded in part five of the cycle, *La prisonnière* (1923): "Que voulez-vous, mon cher, Anaxagore l'a dit, la vie est un voyage". 57 He is fondly remembered by the narrator, Marcel, as a man who, in translation,

knew that he could never produce such good work as in an atmosphere of amorous feelings. Love is too strong a word, but pleasure that is at all deeply rooted in the flesh is

26

helpful to literary work because it cancels all other pleasures ... even if this love leads to

disillusionment, it does at least stir ... the surface of the soul which otherwise would be in danger of becoming stagnant. Desire is therefore not without its value to the writer in detaching him first of all from his fellow men and conforming to their standards, and afterwards in restoring some degree of movement to a spiritual machine which, after a certain age, tends to come to a standstill. We do not achieve happiness but we gain some insights into the reasons which prevent us from being happy and which would have remained invisible to us but for these sudden revelations of disappointment. 58

This link between desire and art aptly sets the tone for *Balso Snell*, for both play a crucial role in the lives of all characters populating the Trojan horse entered by Balso Snell. He himself makes the best use of his highly debatable talents as a lyric poet to chat up and finally seduce Mary McGeeney after his no-nonsense approaches made to Janey Davenport earlier on (p. 39) have failed to make a lasting impression.

Although his speeches consist of a slick hotch-potch of *Carpe Diem* poetry and the "rational philosophy" of Bertrand Russell, Balso is actually *highbrowbeating* about the bush, to coin a phrase. 59 What he is really after is to "have some fun ... come to bed and a new world" (pp. 58-9). This "bush" coinage is not too far-fetched, for variations on this motif are developed throughout *Balso Snell*: from the lewdly transformed sayings "a hand in the bush is worth two in the pocket" (p. 7) and "an egg in the belly is worth more than a bird in the bush" (p. 46) to the "thick clump of bushes [where] Miss McGeeney lay down on her back with her hands behind her head and her knees wide apart" (p. 58), the allusion to pubic hair in particular and sexual activity in general is more than obvious.

In this light, Balso's "B minus and a good spanking" for John Gilson's English Theme written "because Miss McGeeney, [his] English teacher, reads Russian novels and [he wants] to sleep with her" (p. 23), come across as most hypocritical. Balso does not exactly practice what he preaches, "to run about more ... read less and play baseball" (ibidem), chasing every 'skirt' he passes by.

On the other hand, Gilson's bizarre change of sex at the end of his pastiche of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* called "Crime Journal" is indeed shocking. Few schoolteachers would be charmed by this eccentric pervert. 60 Similar to Huysmans' dandy Des Esseintes' sex exchange with the androgynous Miss Urania in *A Rebours*, John Raskolnikov Gilson becomes a Uranian or *Urning*, "imitating the mannered walk of a girl showing off before a group of boys", flirting with sailors, going "through all the postures of a desperate prostitute" (p. 22). 61

"The world was getting to be a difficult place for a lyric poet" (pp. 22-3), or so runs the tongue-in-cheek commentary, linking up Balso with his German colleague and near-namesake Baal. This Lyriker is something of an anti-Bard - like Balso with his infantile lingo and obscene songs - who fits the following verse from Bertolt Brecht's *Baal* (1918):

Der Dichter meidet strahlende Akkorde
Er stösst durch Tuben, peitscht die Trommel still

"art" being, in Freudian terms, a sublimation of the libido:

In der letzten Zeit hast du [Baal] viel Lyrik gemacht.
Du hast wohl schon lange kein Weib mehr gehabt? 62

27

John Gilson, too, travesties his precocious gift as a story-teller in the Russian tradition to win the heart, or rather the body, of his public school teacher.

This is not a mere incident, a schoolboy's crush, but the story of young Gilson's life, for this lad, "still in short pants, [looking] less than twelve years old" is

Fed up with poetry and art. 63 Yet what can I [John] do. I need women and because I can't buy or force them, I have to make poems for them. God knows how tired I am of using the insanity of Van Gogh and the adventures of Gauguin as can-openers for the ambitious Count Six-Times. 64 (pp. 23-4)

But at least this blasé young Oblomovite realises (unlike Balso) why he cannot achieve happiness, for he has actually gained "some insights into the reasons which prevent us from being happy", to recycle Proust's phrase quoted above.

In his “pamphlet”, sold to Balso for a dollar, honest John admits that all his acting

has but one purpose, the attraction of the female. If it had been possible for me to attract by exhibiting a series of physical charms, my hatred would have been less. But I found it necessary to substitute strange conceits, wise and witty sayings, peculiar conduct, Art, for the muscles, teeth, hair, of my rivals. All this much-exhibited intelligence is but a development of the instinct to please. (p. 26)

All the role-playing leads to the following cry of despair, for the masks derived from *Crime and Punishment* and *Othello* seem to have been glued to poor John’s face for life: “Sometimes my name is Raskolnikov, sometimes it is Iago. I never was, and never shall be, plain John Gilson – honest, honest Iago, yes, but never honest John” (p. 14).

Gilson’s artistic inspiration (if any) is masterfully burlesqued by a Proustian reference: his journal is “written while smelling the moistened forefinger of [his] left hand” (p. 14). Here is the celebrated ‘madeleine scene’ from *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in which narrator Marcel’s mother

sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called “petites madeleines”, which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent on the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses ... I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? ... What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? 65 [Part I, *Du Côté de chez Swann* (1913)]

The comic contrast between the ludicrously banal “moistened forefinger” and the elaborate evocation of Combray and the “*temps perdu*” (lost time) triggered off by the exquisite taste of the petite Madeleine soaked in tea (quite possibly tongue-in-cheek as well, to complicate matters) is marvelous. Those who condemn *Balso Snell* as schoolboyish invariably fail to detect, let alone appreciate, this kind of “hidden” literary fun.

28

The heightened sense of taste and smell as attributes belonging to the “dandy” are further ridiculed through allusions to the work of

two other literary dandies, namely that of Edgar Allan Poe and Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Miss McGeeney's biography called Samuel Perkins: Smeller 66 has, if we are to believe her glib sales-talk, all the makings of

Stark, clever, disillusioned stuff, with a tenderness devoid of sentiment, yet touched by pity and laughter and irony ... a delightful story for children ... a genial satire on humanity.
(pp. 32-33)

Its motto strikes the ludicrous "keynote of the work", a satirical verse from Juvenal: "Quis tumidum guttur miratur in alpibus?", correctly translated by teacher/writer McGeeney but for the word "guttur" meaning "throat", which is turned into "goiter" (p. 33), either a *bronchocele* or a vulgar Americanism for a beer gut! 67

Perkins, a cartoonesque descendant of "Des Esseintes, Huysmans' hero" (p. 35) is blessed with an enormous nose. He finds

In the odors of a woman's body never-ending ever-fresh variation and change ... [building] an architecture and an aesthetic, a music and a mathematic. Counterpoint, multiplication, the square of a sensation, the cube root of an experience, all were there. (p. 36)

Perkins' smelly aesthetics correspond very closely indeed with Des Esseintes' terms, which include a "language of scents, a syntax of smells, expertise in the science of perfumes, the idiom of essences, scented harmonies, and fragrant orchestration of poems featuring aromatic stanzas", to heap up a few gems from *A Rebours*. 68

As in John Raskolnikov Gilson's Crime Journal, the literary pastiche modulates into a bizarre, sexually perverse coda. Perkins' "hooter" of a nose is likened to the private parts of a college mate of McGeeney's, who "according to gossip current in the girls' dormitory ... abused himself, [the source of his phallic girls' talk lying] in the peculiar shape of his body: all the veins, muscles and sinews flowed toward and converged at one point" (p. 34).

This joke is taken way beyond the somewhat vulgar realms of college dorms by an allusion to Poe, surely one of the most obscure literary references to appear in *Balso Snell*. The nose-bridge is constructed by dropping the name of "Robert Jones, author of a book called Nosologie [sic] ... a profound admirer of Perkins and a fellow practitioner of his art" (pp. 33-4). In Poe's short story called "Lionizing", Robert Jones is actually presented with (Miss McGeeney tends to misquote, as noticed earlier) a treatise on Nosology. He then gains the admiration of the ladies who all fall for his wonderful nose. 69 The pre-Freudian nose-phallus equation happens to be something of a running gag in the grotesque fiction of Poe, Sterne, and Gogol. 70

By linking up these writers in the grotesque vein through a single literary joke, West shows his true colours as a debutant on the literary scene. For in John Gilson's pamphlet West records his own literary method and obsessions as expressed in *Balso Snell*: "I acquired the habit of extravagant thought. I now convert everything into fantastic entertainment and the extraordinary has become an obsession" (p. 27), acknowledging his profoundly American roots as a writer by echoing a letter *cum* manifesto by Poe, who

29

labeled his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* as "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque, the fearful colored into the horrible, the witty exaggerated into the burlesque, the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical".⁷¹

The link with Poe's deliberate grotesque distortions is further elaborated by the recurrent motif of circles as symbols of perfection and cripples standing for imperfection.⁷² Janey Davenport, a hunchbacked cripple is aptly identified in Balso's Ode to this dog-leg spined nightingale: "O arabesque [Poe again] ... O deviation from the Golden mean! O out of alignment! (p. 38). An impersonal commentator explains – Balso's own piece of

wisdom could of course have been out of character – that Mr Snell, as a connoisseur of the girl-cripple,

likened their disarranged hips, their short legs, their humps, their splay feet, their walleyes, to ornament. Their strange foreshortenings, hanging heads, bulging spinesacks, were a delight, for he had ever preferred the imperfect, knowing well the plainness, the niceness of perfection. (p. 37)

One only has to conjure up the singular unattractiveness of, say, Miss Universe as nice perfection impersonated to realise the truth of this view. But West characteristically pushes it to its outer limits, by showing the grotesque consequences. The impersonal and gleefully sadistic description of suffering quoted above also points to the perverse, though not entirely unfounded theories of Marquis de Sade, who held that

Beauty belongs to the sphere of the simple, the ordinary, whilst ugliness is something extraordinary, and there is no question but that every ardent imagination prefers in lubricity the extraordinary to the commonplace. Beauty, health never strike one save in a single way; ugliness, degradation deal a far stouter blow, the commotion they create is much stronger, the resultant agitation must hence be more lively; in the light of all this, there should be no cause for astonishment

in the fact that an immense crowd of people prefer to take their pleasure with an aged, ugly, and even stinking crone and will refuse a fresh and pretty girl. 73

In Balso's irreverent song (pp. 4-5) the perfection of circles is ridiculed by comparison with "the Anus/ Of a Bronze Horse" and the "Perfect Circles" of the painter Giotto, another symbol for sterile and rather boring perfection. Finally, circles are used as symbols for Monism, "reality exist[ing] ... only in the shape of an *all* or *whole*" (p. 9).

In this respect, honest John Gilson is more of a Pluralist, disavowing the possibility of ever discovering the Real,

A real I could know with my senses. A Real that would wait for me to inspect it as a dog inspects a dead rabbit. But, alas! When searching for the Real I throw a stone into a pool whose ripples become of advancing less importance until they are too large for connection with, or even memory of, the stone agent. (p. 14)

By the same token, West's peculiar pluriform brand of styles requires a reader that watches the many ripples rather than the stone of Realism; Balso Snell is clearly not one of those realistic novels "meant to be read in that quaint, left-to-right, cover-to-cover, linear style still favoured by the ruck of prepostmodernists". 74

30

So neither the wholeness of Realism nor perfect circles are sacred in West's iconoclastic vision. The many scatological puns only imply contempt and ridicule. This rebellious aspect was derived from the French *Dada* movement that tried to shock the complacent middle-classes (*épater les bourgeois*) by signing urinals and constructing collages out of garbage. 75

A practical joke in this Dadaistic spirit seems to have been performed at Brown University: a Black Mass involving "the unveiling of a statue there by the president, at which [it] was revealed to have been covered by excrement". 76

This bright idea "craps up" in John Gilson's pamphlet, which tells the story of an art theatre

Patronized by the discriminating few: art lovers and book-lovers, school teachers who adore the grass-eating Shaw, sensitive young Jews who adore culture [sic] ... homosexualists and homosexualists' assistants, hard-drinking new[s]papermen ... and the writers of advertising copy who, having been covered by tons of excrement from the opened ceiling may "if they so desire, ... gather in the customary charming groups and discuss the play". (pp. 30-1)

In spite of this ultra-modern flirtation with French art movements, *Balso Snell* was originally planned as a "parody of the Troy story" in

1924, and quite a few classical references are interspersed between Balso's adventures down the bowels of Homer's Trojan horse. 77

As Homer's *Odyssey* has it, the Greek Sinon conned the Trojans into believing that the wooden "gift horse" was an expiatory gift to Athena. 78 In actual fact, Greek soldiers were hiding inside the horse, so the army invaded Troy. A clever trick, like the ingenious construction of *Balzo Snell* itself.

The image of an invading army recurs right at the very end, where Balso's body is invaded by "an eager army of hurrying sensations [marching] at first methodically and then hysterically, but always with precision [commencing] a long intricate drill, a long involved ceremony" (pp. 61-2). Homer's horse was not a gift, but a trick. Similarly, Balso's dream horse embodies no real European artists, but parody and pastiche concocted by "writers in search of an audience" (p. 37).

This fake or would-be artistry is made explicit at the "mystic portal" of European art, the "Anus Mirabilis" of the Trojan horse, where ancient graffiti reveals the dying words of "the actor-emperor" identified by the initial N, so Nero. Mourning the loss of a great artist, namely himself, Nero indeed seems to have cried "Qualis Artifex Pereo" before committing suicide. 79 Although "Artifex" may alternatively refer to "deceitful practice" fitting in with Nero's lack of talent, this megalomaniac actually believed that he was a great singer, dancer, and actor. 80

Modern champions of self-delusion are of course Balzo Snell, who sees himself as the lyric poet *par excellence* (compare his introduction to Gilson, p. 23, for instance) and Miss McGeeney, whose ludicrous biography of Samuel Perkins will turn her into "another link in a brilliant literary chain" (p. 23), or so she likes to think. From the bowels of the Trojan horse, both produce horse manure, or what Balso's smelly initials really stand for; in fine, not even Gilson's "B minus art" but fake or failed art: one loud pretentious "F-art, without wanting to flog the controlling extended metaphor to death. 81

31

The fact that the prim and proper teacher McGeeney turns into what might now be labeled "a Barbara Cartland tickled pink",

Eyes aswim with tears. Voice throaty, husky with repressed passion. Oh, how sweet, sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart. Oh, I'm melting. My very bones are liquid. I'll swoon if you don't leave me alone ... What is life without love? I burn! I ache! Hurrah! (pp. 60-1)

making possible the ridiculous union of poet and teacher ("The Two became One") which ends in Balso's *sterile* wet dream ought to give

the many academic post-modernist writers America has produced food for thought.

Coming back to the original "Troy parody", Homeric laughter is caused by the same Miss McGeeney, who, looking "dry and stick-like" (p. 57), is no Helen with the face that launched a thousand ships.⁸² Nor hips, one might add, for "what [Balso] held in his arms was a middle-aged woman dressed in a mannish suit and wearing horn-rimmed glasses" (p. 32). Neither is Balso an epic hero, dying a heroic death in a battle, for he dies what John Gilson calls "the little death" (p. 22) in his own bed.

The unnerving transformation from the "slim young girl busily washing her hidden charms in a public fountain" (p. 31) to the type sketched above closely corresponds with a scene from that modernist version of Homer's epic poem, namely James Joyce's *Ulysses*.⁸³ In the famous beach scene Mr Bloom's Helen, the snowy white-limbed Miss Gerty McDowell (note the Gaelic and syllabic similarity to Miss Mary McGeeney) with her elegant, sexy walk turns out to be lame; her orgiastic monologue is a blue-print for McGeeney's later "yes to the body" (pp. 60-1).⁸⁴

Vice versa, Mary's transformation into "a woman, warm and moist" (p. 57) may be read as a literary wink at Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*.⁸⁵ A knight, a "lusty bachelor" like Balso, kisses an old witch, "a fouler wight ther may no man devyse", who instantly turns into a young beauty: "and she obeyed hym in every thyng/That might doon hym pleasance or likyng".⁸⁶ In similar fashion bathing-beauty Mary, Balso's childhood sweetheart, "lay down on her back with her hands behind her head and her knees wide apart" (p. 58).

Two final classical references ought to be mentioned, one to Apollonius of Tyana, the other to Euripides. In the tour guide's ten-line story called "VISITORS" (pp. 6-7), a "traveler in Tyana ... [carrying] a letter of introduction from [his] brother George" sees a snake "enter the lower part of a man's body". This man turns out to be "the philosopher-saint, Apollonius of Tyana". The "opening" [both the round anus and the circular devices of the story] is pronounced "perfect" by both the traveler, who must be identified as Keats looking for sensational subject-matter to be used in his *Lamia* (1820), and Balso who merely enjoys the scatological twist that the original myth (as recorded in Philostratus' *De Vita Apoloni*) takes in this shocking version.⁸⁷

The allusion to Euripides' play *The Bacchae* has been spotted by two critics, so it may be explored briefly.⁸⁸ When Beagle hears of Janey's death (pp. 52-3), he considers playing the "sober, gentle, umbrella-carrying Mr B. Darwin" or feigning madness, like Hamlet. As B. Hamlet Darwin" he cries out for the "Greek gods" Bromius, Iacchus and the son of Zeus, in fact all names for Dionysus, god of laughter and wine.⁸⁹ Darwin himself is of course a latter-day version of this Bacchus, gulping down cognacs and turning

everything into a joke. In the original play by Euripides this attitude is highly valued:

Cadmus: "Are we the only Thebans who will dance to [Dionysus]?"
Teiresias: "We see things clearly; all the others are perverse." 90

However, Beagle Darwin is no Greek god, but a mere mortal who is well aware of the human condition. Still under the guise of "B. Hamlet Darwin", he alludes to *Macbeth* (V, 7):

Who among us can boast that he was born three times, as was Dionysius [sic]? ... you attempt to be as was Christ, Dionysius, Gargantua! You who were born from the womb, covered with slime and foul blood, 'midst cries of anguish and suffering

Mixing Biblical and mythological images with banal drabness in this "camp" version of the facts of life: "Did [your father] come in the shape of a swan, a bull, or a shower of gold? No! But with his pants unsupported by braces, came he from the bath-room" (p. 55).

This realization is too much to bear for Beagle, who blacks out after alcoholic poisoning. Janey's life and death are, in his view, a cliché and a sick joke ("If I jumped from the third floor I might cripple myself - lucky this room is on the fourth", p. 45) but Beagle's own life is a repetitive "tear-jerker routine ... juggling for the curtain" (p. 56).

His world is a stage, and while "the customers are hollering and screaming: do your stuff, kid! We want Beagle! Let's have Beagle! He's a wow!" [he sits] in [his] dressing-room before the mirror, [making] the faces that won't come off with the grease paint" (p. 51). 91 Like John Gilson, he is aware of his clownesque *persona*, and is equally driven to despair.

33
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER III

49. "Dreams, we know, are not realizable; we might not form any, perhaps, were it not for desire, and it is useful to us to form them in order to see them fail and to learn from their failure." The quotation is from *La prisonnière* (1923).

50. Notice the pun on "piles" or haemorrhoids. West's anally orientated repertoire of jokes seems inexhaustible – his favourite dedication in copies of *Balso Snell* was "From one horse's ass to another".

51. Apparently no critic has noticed that the discussion about water-closets and ancient culture is a pastiche (with a few American touches added) of a scene called "THE GRANDEUR THAT WAS ROME" in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922; rpt. Paris: Shakespeare & Co, 1930), pp. 126-7. It is important to realise that even the short, transitory scenes in *Balso Snell* are in fact gleanings from other literary sources. Similarly, Balso's first prayer ("O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead", p.4) is made up of word-play involving famous composers' names and the closing sentence of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 253: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead". This *has* been noted by several critics, unfortunately.

52. West played the banjo at Brown and knew a great many American songs, alluded to and made up in all of his works. See for instance *Balso Snell*, pp. 4-5 and p. 45.

53. Cf. John Raskolnikov Gilson's murder of an idiot called Adolph with a similarly "unmotivated" murder by the student Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1865-6) trans. David Magarshack (1951; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), esp. pp. 94-106. Another "idiot called Adol[f]" grabbed power in 1933. A year before *Balso Snell* was published, Hitler's NSDAP party received four million votes in Germany. Himself of Jewish-German descent, West would keep

close track of escalating Nazism. See also his early apprehension of native American Fascism in *A Cool Million* (1934).

54. This “honest Iago” probably refers to his self-mocking aside after Othello has greeted Desdemona: “O you are well tun’d now! [punning on the Renaissance lute whose courses consisted of strings tuned an octave apart, one male and one female voice]. But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music, As honest as I am” in *Othello* (II, 1). In fact Iago is, in Brabantio’s words, a profane wretch and a villain, one of those honest men “that but seem to be so”, (I, 2). John Gilson’s honesty seems more bona fide, or is West suggesting that complete honesty is just another pose?

55. See Frank Landsman, “John Barth’s Meta-Fiction: In Search of Lost Fun” (unpubl. undergraduate essay, America Institute Library, University of Amsterdam, 1987).

34

56. For this literary *faux pas*, see David Galloway, “A Picaresque Apprenticeship” in Jay Martin, ed., op.cit., p. 33. No writer named Bergotte actually exists. Mr Galloway is also under the impression that West’s first novel was published in Paris, by an avant-garde press in 1932, instead of New York, 1931. Cf. ibidem, p. 32.

57. See Marcel Proust, *La prisonnière* (1932; rpt. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1954), p. 218.

58. See the excellent translation of Proust’s cycle called *Remembrance of Things Past* trans. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin; and by Andreas Mayor (1981; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), Vol. 3, p. 181.

59. See Reid, op.cit., p. 19 on the “rational philosophy” of Russell.

60. John Gilson’s precocious literary tricks are reminiscent of the French *enfant terrible* Alfred Jarry, who wrote an epic burlesque in “surrealistic” fashion at the age of fifteen; see *Ubu Roi* (1896; rpt. Paris: Livres de Poche, 1962). Jarry’s cosmic coarseness appealed to young West, who claimed that “[w]ith the French ... West can well be compared. In his use of the violently disassociated, the dehumanized marvelous, the deliberately criminal and imbecilic, he is much like Guillaume Apollinaire, [Alfred] Jarry, Ribemont Dessaignes, Raymond Roussel, and certain of the *surréalistes*”; see the advertisement *cum* manifesto written by West himself, “Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone” (1931; rpt. in Martin, ed., op.cit), pp. 29-30.

61. See the English translation of *A Rebours* (1884), *Against Nature* trans. Robert Baldick (1959; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 110. "Urning" was a term for an effeminate homosexual, probably derived from this novel. See also *SOED*, Vol. II, p. 2439 and p. 2441, suggesting 1899 and 1890 as respective "dates" for "Uranism" and "Urning". The type is immortalised in the shape of Proust's Baron de Charlus (memorably portrayed in the filmed version by Alain Delon) and even more so that of his prey Jupien: "what was suggested to me by the sight of this man who was so enamoured of ... his virility ... what he suddenly suggested to me, to such an extent had he momentarily assumed the features, the expression, the smile thereof, was a woman. (...) Meanwhile Jupien ... had – in perfect symmetry with the Baron – thrown back his head, given a becoming tilt to his body, placed his hand with grotesque effrontery on his hip, stuck out his behind, struck poses with the coquetry that the orchid might have adopted on the providential arrival of the bee", in *Cities of the Plain*, Part One, pp. 626-7, op.cit in Note 58 above.

62. See Bertolt Brecht, *Frühe Stücke: Baal* (1918; rpt. München: DTV, 1962), p. 23 and p. 95.

63. In this sense, John Gilson is a true son of Eric Gill, author of *Art-nonsense and other essays* (1929). No name is sacred in West's hands; Gill is mentioned in West's second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), p. 109: "the table [at your last party] is a coffin carved out for you by Eric Gill.

35

64. Both the *double entendre* names and the assorted "Oh's and Ah's" are part and parcel of Victorian accounts of, for instance, "Lady Pokingham's Luxurious Adventures, both before and after her Marriage with Lord Crim-Con", cf. *The Pearl, A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* (1879-80; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 14 ff. West actually planned to compile a dictionary of prostitute's slang in Paris and Hollywood. See also his amusing spoof of early "stag films" called "LE PREDICAMENT DE MARIE où LA BONNE DISTRAITE" in *The Day of the Locust*, pp. 278-81.

65. See *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol. 1, p. 48.

66. The name Sam Perkins contains a private joke on Sid Perelman, who became West's "next of kin" through marrying West's sister, Laura (nee Lorraine Weinstein). The reference to big-nosed Jews, familiar from Shakespeare, Dickens, folklore and cartoons, seems to

stem from a typically Jewish blend of self-mockery and *Selbsthaß* prevalent in the particular *Witz*.

67. See Juvenal's *Satires* (13, 162). A *bronchocele* is "a morbid (often enormous) enlargement of the thyroid gland of the neck" (*SOED*, 3rd ed., p. 867); see also Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (1879; rpt. Oxford: OUP, 1975), p. 832; also, *A Dictionary of American Slang* (1st ed., 1960), p. 212: "(German) goiter" has been used from the 1920s as a humorous term for a beer belly. West's pun may have been directed at German tourists in the Alps.

68. See *Against Nature*, Ch. 10, pp. 118-129. A mouth organ containing liqueurs that correspond with the sound of particular instruments is mentioned in Chapter 4. West's "color clavichord" used by Father Castel (p. 35) would later be developed into a real colour organ by the eccentric Russian composer Alexander Scriabin.

69. See Edgar Allan Poe, "Lionizing" in David Galloway, ed., *Comedies and Satires* (1983; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 25. The nose joke" returns in the later "Loss of Breath". See Frank Landsman, "Poe's Tales: Laughter in the Dark" (unpubl. undergraduate essay, American Institute Library, University of Amsterdam, 1987), p. 7. Poe was also an excellent parodist, judging by his "How To Write a Blackwood Article", in *Comedies and Satires*, pp. 61-80. The link with Huysmans' *A Rebours* is watertight, for Poe is mentioned half a dozen times by Des Esseintes.

70. See Landsman, op.cit., on Gogol's "The Nose" (1836) and Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67).

71. See Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 134. David Galloway wrongfully attributes this quotation to Levin himself in "A Picaresque Apprenticeship", rpt. in Martin, ed., op.cit., p. 43.

36

72. Irving Malin mentions Balso's "quest and obsession for circularity and (w)holeness", interpreting the latter's anti-Semitic remarks as a criticism of "the Jews, who accept the lines of history and body" in *Nathanael West's Novels* (London/Amsterdam: Feffer and Simons, 1972), p. 14. This is an interesting theory in itself, but it is simply untenable in

connection with Balso's predilection for "the imperfect, knowing well the plainness, the niceness of perfection ... 'O deviation from the Golden Mean! O out of alignment!'" (*Balso Snell*, pp. 37-8).

73. See Donatien-Alphonse-Francois, Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and other writings* [orig. publ. as *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*], trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (1785; rpt. New York:: Grove Press, 1967), p. 233. "Scorning ordinary social values and emphasizing man's interior life, the main tendency of experimental literature between 1924 and 1930 had been to turn values inside out – to declare the primacy of dreams over acts, of violence over order, of the sexual gospel of the Marquis de Sade over that of the churches ... of the criminal, insane man or clown over the bourgeois citizen ... many of the same impulses West satirized", see Martin, op.cit., p. 126.

74. See Jonathan Raban, "Like as a ship that through the Ocean wyde ..." review of *The Tidewater Tales*, by John Barth, *TLS*, 19-25 August 1988, p. 901.

75. See Martin, op.cit, p. 125 on Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters.

76. Ibidem, p. 112.

77. Ibidem, p. 127.

78. The story is recounted in Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. W.F. Jackson Knight (1956; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), Bk. II, 57-336, pp. 53-61. The manuscript was left uncompleted in 19 B.C., the year Publius Vergilius Maro died.

79. See *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, new & rev. ed., p. 371.

80. See Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

81. The joke is not a gratuitous one, for West published a story in a summer camp magazine (*The Paradoxian*) called "Western Union Boy" (1918) in which the protagonist, F. Winslow, "known simply as F ... fail[s] dramatically. Jay Martin notes that "for West, F stood for Failure". A preliminary sketch for *Balso Snell* featuring "*Beano Walsh*" was "successively titled 'The Fake', 'L'Affaire Beano' and 'The Impostor'"; see Martin, op.cit., pp. 41-2 and p. 88.

82. The phrase is derived from Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (V.i.97): "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a

kiss!". Of course, the dry school-marm McGeeney ironically stands for "all [that] is dross that is not Helena"!

37

83. See Joyce, *op.cit.*, pp. 331-65.

84. *Ibidem*, see esp. p. 350: "And then ... soft" and Molly Bloom's monologue, esp. p. 735: "then ... Yes". The latter correspondence has been noticed by other critics in a general way. The link with "Helen" seems more appropriate.

85. A similar transformation takes place in James Branch Cabell, *Jurgen* (1919, rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1946), p. 11.

86. See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Tale of the Wyf of Bathe* in: F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), pp. 84-8. This tale is part of *The Canterbury Tales*, designed circa 1387, and is in turn derived from the *Roman de la Rose* composed by Jean de Meun a century earlier. In West's oeuvre, literally nothing is "from the horse's mouth".

87. See Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p. 546: John Keats "wrote to his brother George that he believed [*Lamia*] had 'a sort of fire in it' and that it would please a sensation-loving public". Keats took the basic story for his narrative poem from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Part III, section ii, memb. I, subsect. i. Burton borrowed the legend from Philostratus' *De Vita Apollonii*, Book IV. In these three versions, the bride-to-be of Menippus Lycius is in fact a serpent or "Lamia" who, having been found out by Apollonius, vanishes into thin air. The "Lamia" motif also rears its head in *The Vulgate*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Rossetti's *Eden Bower*. Another instance of West's recycling technique, using a sixth-hand story that adds to the "sublime excrement" of European fiction writers.

88. See Reid, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-4; and Martin, *op.cit.*, p. 61: in 1923, West published an essay entitled "Euripides - A Playwright" as "Nathaniel von Wallenstein Weinstein".

89. In Greek, Bacchus is called "Dionusos", in Latin "Dionysus", not Dionysius", as Beagle (or West) seems to think on p. 55.

90. See Euripides, *The Bacchae and other plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (1954; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 197. *The Bacchae* was composed circa 411 B.C.; West wrote a term paper for a

Brown drama course in 1923, characterising the dialogue between Tiresias and Cadmus as “a vaudeville act”. See Martin, op.cit., p. 61.

91. This “wow-phrase reappears in Lemuel Pitkin’s “Fifteen Minutes of Furious Fun with Belly Laffs Galore” in West’s third novel, *A Cool Million* (1934), p. 248.